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A Single Decision (Take Two)

By: Timewatch (/u/1698214/Timewatch)  (https://www.fanfiction.net/pm2/post.php?uid=1698214)

Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

Rated: Fiction T (https://www.fictionratings.com/) - English - Sci-Fi/Friendship - General Grievous, OC - Chapters: 53 - Words: 542,002 - Reviews: 1,397 (/r/11714223/) - Favs: 1,321 - Follows: 1,431 - Updated: Aug 19, 2022 - Published: Jan 4, 2016 - id: 11714223

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Chapter 25

High summer on Naboo was a pleasant season, Esera decided, the moment she stepped off the freighter of dubious registry that had taken her through Hutt Space in just under eighteen hours, counting stops. The sun was hot, the air was warm, and it was delightfully dry compared to the muggy Zygerria or the freezing rain of Raxus. On her way to the Loyalist bastion of the Mid Rim, Esera had done some reading on the place. While the cosmopolitan upper class might have been more inclined to accept off-world fashion, the common people were conservative for the most part, so Esera dressed conservatively. She couldn't make her hair grow out to proper Naboo length, but the simple, ankle-length dress certainly helped her blend in. R8 followed her, carrying her lightsaber and one relevant Sith holocron she'd brought with in a compartment now shielded from scanners. Besides the changes of clothes in her suitcase, all her other possessions were with the Sephi on Raxus.

"Here we are," she said to R8, as they walked through the open-air spaceport. "Somewhere in this city is what we're looking for."

R8 chirped, and pointed his domed head to the right.

"That way? Alright, let's go."

Soon she saw what her droid friend had spotted: a board for new arrivals, pointing the way to customs, baggage claim, food, lodging, and more. *So practical*, thought Esera, with a smile. Now a woman with an income, Esera could be a bit pickier with her places of residence. It wasn't the Jedi way, but she wasn't a Jedi. Especially not here on Naboo. She was just an ordinary woman, here on business, and that's the role she'd play. Or try to, at least.

Esera found a hotel right in the middle of the city, in a commercial district on one of the many islands formed by the Solleu river's multiple channels. Theed was like no city she'd been in before. It was compact, the streets were mostly too narrow for speeder traffic and winding every which way, the buildings made of a tan sandstone and tiled with rusty red ceramics or bronze plates that had turned green from weathering. Trees and flowers were everywhere, from block-sized parks to planters hanging under every window, providing shade and fragrance and enough pollen to tickle Esera's nose. *I could live here*, Esera thought, wandering from island to island over foot-bridges, exploring alleys and streets, discovering hidden courtyards up steep stairways or beyond maze-like tunnels. Her mission was temporarily forgotten.

On one such sojourn, Esera found herself in a fruit market, standing next to a woman with two babies, accompanied by a golden protocol droid. She kept stealing glances at the woman, sure she'd seen her before somewhere. *Very* sure. This did not go unnoticed.

"Well, are you going to ask me or not?" the woman questioned, raising an eyebrow.

"Huh?" Esera blushed. "Uh, ask you what?"

"If I am who you think I am."

"Um, are you... are you Senator Amidala?" asked Esera.

The woman smiled. "Yes, I am. It's really me, buying pears at the market."

Esera's stomach flipped upside down, and she forced herself to laugh, sounding fake even to her. "Oh, wow, I, uh, didn't expect to meet someone like you here." She looked down at the babies in their hovering stroller. "I wasn't aware you had children..?" Esera asked, trailing off not only because she was possibly committing a social faux pas, but because she'd felt something in the Force the moment she laid eyes on the two infants. Something powerful.

"They're war orphans," Amidala said. "I adopted them."

"They're adorable," Esera said. *And strong with the Force, do you know that?* She looked closer at the children. "What are their names?"

"Luke and Leia," said the Senator. The more Esera looked, the more she realized how much the girl, Leia, looked like her mother. *I don't think these twins are adopted*, she thought. *Who could possibly be the father?* The boy had bright blue eyes. There were a lot of men in the galaxy with blue eyes, like Esera's older brother Toren, or Anakin Skywalker, to name a few. *Maybe it was Skywalker*, thought Esera, with a little smirk. *Imagine that, that loose cannon action hero with this idealistic pacifist. I don't think it'd have worked!*

"Hello, Luke and Leia," said Esera, to the infants. There was a warm feeling in her heart, one she couldn't entirely understand. "There's a crazy galaxy out there, kids. You stick by your mother, alright?"

Amidala smiled again, but now it was a sad smile. "And it's only getting crazier, isn't it?"

"Yeah..." *Sorry Senator, I'm responsible for that*, thought Esera. "You know, I've always appreciated the work you've done, for the Republic. You're one of the last sane people on Coruscant, I think."

"That's why I had to get out of there, just for a while," Amidala said. "I couldn't take it anymore. War and death and blood and money, that's all there is out there now. I've tried so many times to stop it, but..." She shook her head. "I'm just one voice. You've got men like Tarkin on one side and Grievous on the other, they'll bleed the Galaxy dry if they can. They don't want peace, they'll never listen. They'd fight until there's no one left alive."

"Still, I'm grateful there's someone like you around," said Esera. "It gives me hope. There's people like you on the other side, you know. Maybe one day it'll be you and them talking, not Tarkin and Grievous."

"I am terribly sorry to interrupt," the golden droid said, leaning in to their conversation. "But you do have an appointment with the Queen in forty-five minutes, Senator."

"That's alright, C-3PO," said Amidala. "What are your name again?" she asked.

"Esera," said Esera.

"It was nice to meet you, Esera. I hope one day it'll be us at the negotiation table," Amidala said.

"Huh?" Esera froze where she stood.

"That's a very Raxian way of styling your hair and doing your makeup," the Senator said, still smiling. "I take it you're one of those people from the other side, who think like I do?"

Okay, she's sharp, Esera thought. *I better go with this*. "You caught me," said Esera, raising her hands in mock surrender. "Look, I'm not acting on authority of my government. And I certainly didn't expect to meet you in the market, I was planning for... an appointment, or something. But I know Grievous better than I'd like, and this war is going to get a whole lot worse. That being said..." Esera took a deep breath. "I have reason to believe that he *might* be willing to talk terms, some day in the future. And I sincerely hope it'll be the likes of you, and Mon Mothma, and Bail Organa, rather than Wilhuff Tarkin or Orn Free Taa that answers the call, you know? So please, don't give up, Senator. You've got more friends than you think."

Amidala contemplated her words, looking at her two babies. "I hope you're not asking me to put my faith in that monster," she said.

"No," Esera said. "Have faith in the rest of us, that's what I'm asking. Don't leave the Senate, don't give up on peace. There's still a chance out there."

"I will try, Esera, I will try," said Amidala. "I don't need to have you arrested, do I?"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't!" Esera said, laughing nervously.

"Alright. I've gone undercover to Raxus before, I suppose it's only fair you'd get to do the same here." Amidala gathered up her pears and handed them to C-3PO. She offered Esera a friendly, parting smile. "Do stay out of trouble, will you?"

"I'll try my best, Senator. Good luck, with everything," said Esera.

"You as well."

And that ended her encounter with one of the most famous women in the galaxy. Esera's eyes darted around the market, looking for the guards that would be trailing her. *There you two are*, thought Esera, noticing the plainly-clothed but strong-looking men loitering in the shadow of a pillar. They looked at her, before casually strolling off in the same direction as Amidala. There was probably another pair nearby, so Esera decided to make herself scarce before they decided to take an interest in her. *Well, let's get to business. I have a Sith starship to find and steal, easy mission, right?* She had a few ideas already.

But that night, as she was eating dinner and watching the holonet in her hotel, all hell broke loose in the Galaxy.

Once again, Senator Wilhuff Tarkin found himself in the situation room with the Chancellor, assorted Jedi generals, Republic high command, and the other most important and influential members of government. Yesterday, it had been an emerging Separatist attack to regain Mygeeto's orbit. Tonight, it was something far bigger.

"Two hours ago, a Confederate-" Director Orlok cleared his throat, after receiving a sharp glance from Admiral Salima. "A *Separatist* fleet of twelve thousand ships jumped into the Kashyyyk system. We've spotted Admiral Hithlu's flagship, as well as *Invisible Hand* itself in the fleet."

"Twelve thousand?" said Salima. "That's a fifth of their remaining ships."

"They're desperate," said Mace Windu.

"Desperate, or they know more than we do," said Governor Therbon, commanding officer of the 12th Fleet, based at Lantilles. "Minutes ago, another fleet attacked Uytter. Eight thousand ships. Our garrison has already been overwhelmed."

"A third of their ships," Salima muttered, putting a hand on her chin.

"Twenty-thousand Separatist ships, an entire third of their navy, concentrated in *two* sectors. That is two, ladies and gentleman. *Two*." Orlok said, holding up two fingers. "This is no ordinary offensive."

"Have we identified their goals?" asked Windu.

"No," said Orlok.

Chancellor Mas Amedda frowned at the hologram map in front of them. "Why Uytter?" he asked. "There's nothing there but farms and tax dodgers."

"Uytter's only claim to fame is that it's between Lantilles and Kashyyyk," said Therbon. "That's not a major issue, as we can supply our forces at Boz Pity through Hutt Space, and Belderone through the Perlemian Trade Route. Kashyyyk is not strategically or economically significant."

Therbon didn't mention the supply issues his oversector had been having. Separatist raiders had been hitting his convoys for three weeks, the troops on Belderone were suffering severe shortages of ammunition and fuel. There had been talk of making a tactical withdrawal to Centares to shorten the supply lines. The situation was similar elsewhere, Republic logistics were a mess from the viciously renewed Separatist commerce raiding. *If only we had escort ships*, Tarkin thought. Palpatine had been unwise to halt their production in favor putting more funding towards the new *Imperators*, of which only a few dozen were operational so far. What Grievous was doing was obvious. He was holding the Republic 11th Fleet in battle at Kashyyyk until their supply issues became critical, and they'd be forced to retreat, giving up worlds and resources. But not everyone was trained in classical warfare like Tarkin, the fools couldn't see what was right under their nose. And that would work to his favor.

"Be that as it may, Governor, we must do something about this new attack on the Wookiees," the Togruta Jedi said. Tarkin didn't know her name, but he hated her garish red and white skin. *Aliens are truly vile*.

Thorban shrugged. "We lost a lot of troops there three months ago," said he. "And for what? There's nothing of value down there. The hyperlane maps Grievous wanted don't even exist."

"So the Wookiees say," Tarkin muttered.

"The Wookiees have been a part of the Republic since its founding," Mas Amedda said. "We should defend them."

"I agree," Organa said. "They sided with us, we should be loyal to that."

The Jedi nodded in agreement, as did Salima. Therbon didn't care either way. Only Tarkin and Orlok were dissenting voices.

"Kashyyyk can be lost with no consequence," Tarkin said. "We should confiscate the hyperlane maps and conserve our forces."

"I would be cautious of engaging the Separatists in battle right now. Our supply issues are critical and our ship production is stalled while the yards switch to the new class of Star Destroyer," Orlok said.

Amedda gave Orlok a quizzical look. "Temporary issues, Director." He was being pushed to fight, and Amedda went with who pushed hardest. "Governor Therbon, do what you need to do to get reinforcements to Kashyyk. I'll speak to Praji and see what the 4th Fleet can do."

Just as planned, Tarkin thought. Soon the Republic would be committed to a battle that Grievous had arranged for it to be unable to win. The only way to win was to withdraw from the region and consolidate supplies for a counter-attack. All they had to do was avoid the fight and wait for the Separatist's new burst of energy to sputter out. But if they did that, the Senate would see weakness in their position, and likely open up terms. No, that would not do at all. Tarkin would see to it that the Republic's defeat was bloody enough, courtesy of Grievous's typical cunning brutality, to rile them up and demand for the war to go on, no matter the cost, to avenge the fallen.

Orlok saw the same things Tarkin did, but he'd given up. He was only an intelligence officer, after all. Perhaps, in his mind, the admirals would find a way out of this predicament he couldn't. But the Republic's high command suffered from a lack of education. Praji, Salima, Therbon, they were all field officers who had been promoted by merit. Merit was good, and they were all good officers, but they'd never attended a day of academy in their lives. They didn't have the historical context that the likes of Tarkin and his old schoolmate Renau did, they couldn't make connections to past events that they never knew happened. They could only learn from mistakes that didn't need to be made. Incompetent Jedi meddling just made things worse.

Who will they send this time? wondered Tarkin. *Master Yoda, the decrepit relic who couldn't plan a proper battle to save his life? Perhaps Master Windu, he at least has some combat sense.* It was a shame Anakin Skywalker was dead. He'd almost liked the man.

"I sense a trap," Mace Windu said.

"I agree," said Master Yoda.

The Jedi Council sat in session, everyone but Obi-wan, Yoda, Shaak Tii, and Mace Windu were off-world at the moment, communicating through hologram. "I don't sense anything," Obi-wan said. "The situation at Kashyyyk seems to be war as usual."

"I have meditated for the past six hours," Shaak Ti said, "but I feel nothing."

"This isn't a feeling from the force, just an observation," Windu said. "Grievous is a coward, he'd never commit to a fight of this scale unless he was sure he could win."

He seems plenty brave to me, Obi-wan thought. Windu had only fought Grievous once, fleetingly, as the cyborg escaped with his prize; Obi-wan had survived him how many times now? Six? Seven?

"Trap or not, we must send aid to the Wookiees," Plo Koon said.

"Sad, it is, that war has returned so soon to Kashyyyk." Yoda looked contemplatively out over Coruscant's skyline. "Go, I will. My responsibility, this is."

Just as the Grand Master had made his decision, an inbound communication alert went off. Someone was calling the Council, directly from Republic Intelligence headquarters. The hologram of Director Orlok appeared, the stout bald man tugging at his bushy mustache.

"Jedi Masters," the Director said. "There's been a development in the Mytaranor Sector. A new Separatist fleet has appeared at Yitabo. Sixteen thousand ships."

If Obi-wan had been drinking, he would have spit it out. "Sixteen thousand? For *Yitabo*?" he asked, incredulous. Yitabo was an agriworld, lightly populated, it had no industry or infrastructure to speak of. The only Republic presence in the system was an automated listening post.

"Whatever this is, it's big," Saesee Tiin said. "We should be cautious before committing anyone to this battle who isn't there already."

"For what it's worth, I share the same opinion, Jedi Masters," Orlok said. "Two-thirds of the Separatist navy is present in this region. My analysts think Grievous is trying to force a decisive battle." The blank looks the Council gave him informed Orlok they had no idea what he was talking about. "Among some military circles, there is a belief that wars are decided through singular, pitched, and decisive engagements. Grievous's record indicates he thinks along these lines, that's why he prefers large-scale actions like Duro and Coruscant. And now this, whatever it is."

"We have more and better ships, shouldn't we meet him and crush him?" suggested Agen Kolar.

"I see we have some proponents of the decisive battle here, too," remarked Orlok, frowning.

"Patience," Master Yoda said. "More to this than it appears, it seems. Go to Kashyyyk again, I will, but alone."

"Is that wise?" asked Windu. "Grievous is there in person, this time."

"Then deal with him, I shall. And recent mysteries, perhaps, I will uncover."

The issue was decided. Who was going to argue with Master Yoda?

"Look at them run!" Kronaak said, roaring with an approximation of laughter. The Republic fleet at Randon was scattering in every direction as the massive Separatist invasion force descended on it.

"They are flying, not running," said Khan's hologram.

"They are fleeing," suggested Kronaak.

"Yes, fleeing," Khan said, metal hands clasped in front of him. "Would it be organic of me to say I had hoped for a fight?"

"I would say yes," Kronaak said.

"I hoped for a fight, then." The droid shook his beaked head. "So sad."

Randon was not a poor colony of no consequence like Yitabo. It had a surface worth controlling. Kronaak's battleship began disgorging landing ships; they'd only need one *Lucrehulk's* worth of troops to take it, Khan estimated. The clone garrison was small and the locals wealthy enough that they'd surrender rather than risk losing everything.

Khan's prediction was right, as half an hour, Randon surrendered unconditionally after the clones had been atomized. Kronaak thanked them for cooperating, assured them he had not come to loot and steal the hard-earned possessions of others, and began to prepare for the next part of his mission. He sent a report of his progress to General Grievous.

At this point, the fleet would split into two equal halves. Khan would continue on to Terr'Skiar, while Kronaak began moving up towards Kashyyyk. He'd leave a substantial rear guard at Randon, though. Operation Striking Star was reliant on blocking all known hyperlanes to Kashyyyk, and it would be easier to keep up a far blockade than it would a close blockade.

"I have considered your proposal," Khan said.

"Oh?"

"I find it reasonable to cut through Hutt Space via the Deysum system rather than fight through multiple Republic systems to reach Terr'Skiar," said Khan.

"Yes, good," said Kronaak, his mandibles clicking. "Grievous has not been interested in moving against the Hutts, but I am happy you can see the logic in it."

"The Republic can freely traverse Hutt Space, we are blocked from it. The Hutts are as complicit in the war against us as the Republic itself is," Khan stated. "As the General has left it to us to complete our missions, I do not calculate that the he will be displeased by this detour. My only concern is unexpected resistance. You are experienced in Hutt Space, yes?"

"I am," said Kronaak. "The Hutts are gangsters, not warriors. They are cowardly, paranoid, fearful, greedy. Blast a few palaces from orbit and they'll roll over."

"You are much more pragmatic than other organics I've worked with," Khan said. "It is refreshing."

"The only good Hutt is a dead Hutt," Kronaak said.

Khan took his fleet into Hutt Space, exiting without warning at Deysum, and then changing course to pass by Bissillirus, another Hutt-controlled system. No doubt the Hutts would be fuming at this violation of their fake neutrality, but Kronaak didn't care. In fact, he hoped Khan would cause an interstellar diplomatic incident. The droid would never tolerate Hutt foolery like Dooku had, and neither would Grievous, once he was riled up. If Striking Star went as planned – and it would, Kronaak would see to that – then they'd have all the forces they needed to take down the Hutts, once and for all.

There was one issue with Khan's route: it'd put him out of supply until Eemon's convoys were rerouted to pass through Deysum as well. At least until they had established a direct link through Republic space. *Oh well*, thought Kronaak. *Eemon will just have to deal with that*.

"More Republic ships are arriving every hour," Admiral Hithlu reported to Grievous. "Some are going to Kashyyyk's surface, others are joining the fleets throughout the system. They will have firepower parity with us within a day or two."

"Good," Grievous said. He checked the holomap of the local sectors. The blue tendrils of the Confederacy were spreading out, some across newly-blazed hyperlanes, some across ancient, commonly-known ones. Uytter, Yitabo, Randon, Ota, Rorgam, Terr'Skiar, one by one, systems were falling to the onslaught of Striking Star. Curiously, Khan had taken a shortcut through Hutt Space to reach his objective, and was now striking at Pizilis at the same moment as Kronaak, completing the near-encirclement of the Kashyyyk system. It'd moved operations on that side of Kashyyyk up by several days.

All that remained was to keep the enemy from breaking this encirclement for the next two weeks, as Skull-face Khwaramenes made up his own ninety-eight jump hyperspace route from Balamak to Torn Station, the only point through which Republic supplies and reinforcements could be allowed to flow through.

Mathematically speaking, Grievous's goal was impossible. The Republic had too many ships, and too many men, for a mere half of the Confederate Navy to hold off for two weeks. That was why he had spent the past month directing raids against supply hubs and depots all throughout the Mid Rim and Expansion Region as Captain Hatha and *Cataclysm* terrorized the Inner Rim and Core. Yes, mathematically, the Republic had better ships, and more of them. But in reality, a large percentage of those ships would be stuck where they were for lack of fuel or munitions or food for the crews or even crews themselves. The

Republic logistics corps had taken a huge hit to their escort numbers and shipping tonnages in the last few weeks, they were down a hundred million tons. Even if they had supplies to move, how would they move them without ships?

Grievous chuckled to himself. That was the great advantage of being a warrior in a galaxy that hadn't seen a full-scale war in a thousand years. He'd learned his lessons decades ago. One could have the finest weapons in the galaxy, and it wouldn't matter if one's supply lines were gone. Logistics won wars as much as courage and firepower did. They were not glorious, but thankfully, men like Ricimer Eemon were on hand to do the dirty work, and happy for it. Young Eemon had thrown himself into the challenge of supplying over forty thousand ships with gusto.

"Do we have a clear path to the surface yet?" Grievous asked Hithlu.

"For the moment, yes, sir," said Hithlu. "If there's a time to invade, it'd be now."

"I will begin landing operations, then." Grievous whirled about, cape swirling behind him. He gathered up his lightsabers and summoned all of his magnaguards. In the downtime at Raxus, his *Sheathipede* shuttle had been upgraded substantially. Improved shields, remote-controlled gun turrets, and additional armor were just the external changes to the former luxury transport. The avionics were entirely replaced, making the shuttle now essentially a mobile command post, a state-of-the-art electronic warfare suite was installed, and the landing gear now had wide pads for soft-ground touch-down, instead of claw-like points. This shuttle joined the swarm of C-9979 transports, HMP gunships, and Vulture droids headed for the surface of Kashyyyk. *There'd better be a Jedi down here*, Grievous thought.

The landing ships descended on Wawaatt archipelago, the same place they'd landed the first time, months ago. There really was no better location, most of Kashyyyk's surface was dense forest or empty ocean. The open beaches and sparse coastal woodland made for a much better beachhead for the large landing ships. Besides, their objective was on the archipelago anyway. Last time, the city of Kachirho was the target of an amphibious assault across the lagoon. Grievous did not care much for amphibious assaults on heavily defended targets. This time, he would take a city further down the island and attack overland. Palsaang would do nicely as an initial target, Grievous had decided.

HMP gunships carrying racks of B2 super battle droids secured the landing sites; they dropped their heavy infantry off, who cleared out the scant local Wookiee resistance in minutes. The C-9979s were cleared to land. MTTs were too big and bulky for this campaign, Grievous had once again brought NR-N99 tank droids. Their firepower was decent, but not enough to take on the Republic's ten-wheeled behemoths. No, their true value lay in their ability to bulldoze paths for the rest of the army. Repulsorlifts had struggled in heavily wooded terrain, Grievous had noted, the device worked against solid ground, but not against the multitude of fallen, porous debris such as logs, branches, leaves, and other assorted organic detritus. This wouldn't be an issue if his tank droids just flattened everything into one compact mass. Tens of thousands of AATs waited in landers still on their transports elsewhere in the system as a reserve, Grievous wanted the battlefield prepared for them.

Also coming with the first wave were OG-9 spider droids and Octuptarra magna tri-droids. At the start of the war, Grievous had often used the OG-9s as long-ranged anti-armor platforms, but after three years of experimenting, he realized that their beam weapons were highly effective anti-aircraft artillery as well. His OG-9s would be kept in defensive rings at the rear of the army, engaging the accursed Republic gunships from afar. The Octuptarras would engage the Republic's heavy armor instead. Grievous had given them instructions to arc their missiles upwards or take the high ground so that they might hit the weaker roof armor of the Republic Juggernauts at a flatter angle.

Grievous's armies had always been inspired by his battles on Kalee, but freed from the techno-slavery of the mind chips, Grievous had found himself planning the same tactics and forming the same doctrines he'd used to destroy the huk invaders. Gone were the wasteful formation charges of the past. This time, Grievous's plan for Kashyyyk was much like his plan for the battle in the sector overall. His battle droids and their heavy ordinance would hold the Republic's troops in place, locking them in a battle they couldn't easily retreat from, as his mechanized divisions swept around the flanks and hit them from the sides. Encircle and annihilate, just like what Hithlu and the other admirals had been entrusted to do above. Grievous hoped he'd brought enough tanks clear paths through the dense inland forests to let this happen.

He also hoped there would be Jedi deployed already. His only dueling action since Coruscant had been with Kenobi, Ventress, and Tano. Sparring with Komara didn't count, she was not an interesting opponent, a hard as she tried to be. Grievous wondered how her mission was going, as he watched his army advance on the tree-city of Palsaang.

Grievous's attack on the Wookiees made galactic headlines immediately. Nearly three months of quiet had followed the failed coup on Raxus, as the Separatists consolidated and raided, and the Republic's war effort stalled as its supply lines reached their limit. The first invasion of Kashyyyk had been treated as a move of desperation, in Loyalist media. Esera remembered the pundits theorizing that the cyborg was after the hyperlane maps supposedly kept by the Wookiee navigator's guild, or perhaps he was trying to take pressure off Boz Pity and Saleucami. The retreat of the Separatists during the coup marked the end of their last attempt to turn the tide on that front, they said.

They'd been woefully wrong, as it turned out. By the numbers, Grievous's new offensive was the biggest singular offensive since his invasion of Duro and drive on the Core. In percentage of total Separatist ships deployed, it was *the* largest offensive of the war, on either side. The Holonet news channels were claiming anywhere from half to nearly all remaining Separatist fleets had been committed, and the Republic must answer in kind.

"Yeah, right," Esera muttered in the lobby of her hotel, watching the news. "They should run now and save themselves."

R8 hummed and whirred.

"Can you believe he kept this secret from me?" asked Esera. "I mean, I knew *something* big was coming, but not this big."

The droid whistled.

The new battle made an excellent distraction. All of Theed was indoors, glued to their holotanks, in their restaurants and wine parlors, salons and bars, living rooms and kitchens. The streets were empty. This was her perfect chance to strike.

Esera peeked out from behind a potted plant at the government hangar complex. Night had fallen over Theed, the flowers closed up and the birds sleeping. *Scimitar* was in a hangar on the edge of the city, a building made with care and an artisan's flare, like the rest of the city, but clearly had seen better days. She'd dressed in an embarrassingly close-fitting but extremely practical black two-piece outfit, which reduced her thermal signature and had plenty of places to keep tools while one was climbing walls or jumping between rooftops. These kinds of clothes were readily available in Hutt Space, as Esera had learned on a brief fueling stop on her way to Naboo, tailored more for thieves than infiltrators. But there wasn't that much of a difference.

She put up the hood of her cloak, and dashed across the street, into the shadow of the hangar wall. Esera did a crouched run under it, until she found an annex building with windows. There, she ditched the cloak, and pulled herself up onto the ledge. With a pair of night-vision goggles, Esera peered inside. *Nothing in there*, she thought, clambering to the next ledge. She checked every room in the annex, until she found a computer terminal. Esera extended a hand, and activated it from afar.

"There we go," she whispered to herself, even though no one was around at this hour. No one but a lone security guard she'd seen ambling along, talking on a communicator to the man he was cheating on his wife with, by the sound of it. *What I wouldn't give to listen in on that!* But she had no time for social scandals. Esera adjusted the googles' zoom, until she could clearly see the computer screen. Finding what she was after was unsurprisingly easy. Who would make the air conditioning controls hard to access? *Alright, looks like the unit's on the roof,* she thought, looking up several stories to the hangar's top.

Her boots had climbing spikes, her gloves had been dipped in an anti-slip coating. Helped by the Force's guidance, Esera crawled up the sandstone wall, cringing every time little chunks of sand particles and their matrix clattered down the wall. A better Jedi would have simply been able to jump a dozen and some meters, but not Esera.

At the top was a collection of domes, arranged in an eye-pleasing pattern, disguising the ventilation machinery of the building. The Naboo did nothing without style. Esera went to the dome with the air conditioning unit, and opened the hatch. A few flicks through the Force and she'd unlocked the panels over the machine.

"Okay R8," she said into her communicator. "Send me the technical manual on... whatever kind of air conditioner this is." *I should have brought Voyan,* Esera thought, as a hologram of a three hundred page manual appeared in front of her. Eventually, she settled on just unplugging something.

The next morning, Esera got out something she'd bought herself on Raxus, to the confoundment of the Sephi sisters. It was a powerful tool, one that could get past all but the tightest of security in the galaxy, a tool she once thought all Jedi should have at their disposal:

A fluorescent orange safety vest.

Esera strolled up to the hangar security booth, in a working woman's trousers and jacket, safety vest on, datapad and box of tools in hand, and R8 behind her, dirtied up to look like a typical maintenance droid. The poor fellow had put up quite a fuss when he realized his pricey Raxian oil bath was about to be ruined, Esera had had to promise him another one when they got back.

"Air conditioner problems?" asked Esera, to the guard.

"Wow, you guys got out here fast!" the guard said. He opened the gate for her and waved her in. "They're sweating like Gungans in there, don't mind the smell."

Works every time, Esera thought, trying not to cackle like Grievous would have. No one questioned the safety vest.

R8 beeped nervously as Esera walked in to the building. It wasn't his first infiltration, Esera didn't know what he was worried about. "Relax," she told him, "there's no Gossams hunting us this time." The droid made a low whistle.

Esera took a lift up to the top floor of the annex building, then a service hall into the hangar. From a catwalk that circled the whole hangar, she could see everything below. There were various pieces of machinery, a few fancy star yachts, nothing interesting. There were four other hangars, though. Esera followed the catwalk along the inside of the wall, and it took her through each hangar, until she came to the last one. There, all alone, was a large tarp hiding what was obviously a ship.

"There you are," Esera murmured. "Stay right there!"

She and R8 backtracked to the first hangar, and Esera climbed the ladder up the roof, where she connected the wire she'd unplugged last night. However, R8 waited below, plugged into the computer terminal. It wouldn't come back on until R8 activated it. As far as the Naboo were concerned, Esera was working on the machine. Esera went back over the hangar roofs until she arrived at the last, opened a hatch, and climbed down the ladder.

There were no cameras. This Darth Sidious was extremely paranoid, Grievous had told her. He hated any proof of his visits existing, so he simply removed the cameras from the hangars so he could come and go as he pleased. The Naboo government had no reason to suspect this hangar complex was anything but a private ship storage facility. Which it was, Sidious just happened to use it as a front to store one ship in particular without raising eyebrows. Crime was uncommon in Theed, anyway; Esera had noted many doors and windows went unlocked at night.

Esera walked up to the covered ship, and ducked under the tarp. She found herself under one of the stubby wings, a folded up radiator above her. Ahead was the spherical, two-deck cabin of the ship. *We meet at last, Scimitar,* Esera thought. She looked around for an control panel to open the cabin, but she found nothing. *If this ship was made for a Sith to use, then it stands that only a Sith could be able to get inside, right? Or a Jedi...*

She reached out through the Force, feeling along the seam of the boarding ramp. *Ah, there!* Esera tugged on something inside the ship. A clamshell door split open, and a ramp hissed down, ruffling the tarp covering the ship. Cautiously, Esera stepped up, into the gloom, and a red light lit up the interior as she entered. Immediately, she felt the presence of the dark side, a shadow that lazily swirled around her. *Of course the dark side is here, it's a Sith ship,* Esera thought. *It's just a trace... Nothing to get worried over.*

The first deck of the cabin had three storage bays, two bunks tucked away in their own bays too, and a final bay that held a refresher, sink, and shower. That washroom must have been a tight squeeze for Maul, but Esera found it adequately sized, just like *Encounter's* halls and rooms. There was a small hatch to the prow of the ship, presumably for maintenance and storage purposes. A lift was nestled between the two bunk-bays. Why a two-deck ship would need a lift, Esera didn't know, but up she went. The ship seemed to realize she was there, and was turning itself on as she went.

The second deck had six seats along the back, and up front was where the pilot sat, in a swiveling chair allowing access to wide control panel. The viewport was narrowest in the middle, where the pilot sat. For a normal person, this would be inconvenient, but for a Force sensitive like Esera, why, she could fly this ship with her eyes closed. Maybe. The dark side was even stronger up here. Esera could feel fury and hate dripping from the bulkheads. It made her skin crawl.

"So, you're *Scimitar*," Esera said to the ship.

The ship's ventilation system stirred to life, sending a caressing breeze across Esera's cheek.

"I don't think you're an ordinary ship. But I'm not anything like your last master. I'll be doing things differently," said Esera. In any other circumstance, she might have been felt stupid talking to a machine like this. But if the Force was this strong with *Scimitar*, she wasn't taking any chances. "You've sat here since Maul arrived on this planet, haven't you?"

The red lights grew brighter, and the control panel flickered into life.

"I bet you're eager to get back out among the stars... Well, good news, we will be. Soon. Another adventure, how does that sound?"

Esera heard the engines begin to spool up. "No, no, not yet! Power down!" she said, and the engines shut off again. "There's some things I need to get. I'll be back for you tonight, okay?"

The ship was silent, and the lights dimmed.

"Patience. Twelve hours, that's all I ask. Not like anyone else on this planet can fly you, anyway..."

She exited the ship, and breathed a sigh of relief once she was out. The dark side presence was almost oppressive in there. Esera didn't know how she was going to get this ship back to Grievous without taking some breaks along the way. Hopefully something could be done about that darkness. She made her way back up to the roof, and over to the air conditioning unit. "We're all good," she called down to R8. The machine went on, and Esera took her leave, politely declining an offer of free lunch from the hangar staff. She was going to steal one of their ships tonight, after all.

"Sir, the Wookiees have retreated inside their central tree," the battle droid command reported.

"Hmm." Grievous stared up at the massive tree, well over three hundred meters tall, its center hollowed out over the generations to create a city within. The Wookiees of Palsaang had painted the trunks of their trees, though many of their murals had since been scorched and burnt by blasterfire.

"It appears that their last militia are guarding the old and the young in there," the droid continued.

"I did not come to Kashyyyk to kill greybeards and children," Grievous said.

"Wookiees don't have beards, sir-"

Grievous's fist dropped on the droid's head. "Shut up. I am going to come up with a plan to lure the Jedi out."

"Sir, is it wise for you to be leading from the front?" asked the droid.

Grievous held back the urge to whack the droid's head off. "Report to the front lines," he said. "Your questions annoy me."

"Roger, roger."

He was growing frustrated with the lack of Jedi. There were supposed to be two here! Masters Unduli and Vos had been seen on Kashyyyk as recently as seventy-two hours ago. The Separatist fleet had been in the system for a few days, there was no way they could have escaped. *I'm going to need to bait them out*, Grievous thought. His eyes turned to the tree full of non-combatants, but the words died before he even spoke them. *Is that what I do?* he asked himself. *Butcher the weak to draw out the strong?*

It was a valid strategy, it worked; that was for sure. Three months ago, Grievous would have done it in a heartbeat. But now, something held him back. The huk had never hesitated to use indiscriminate violence on the Kaleesh, and the Kaleesh had never hesitated in turn. But what had Wookiees done to Grievous or his people? There was no sport, there was no justice, there was no skill in doing what he considered.

Who says I have to be honest, though? This is what is expected of Grievous, by the Jedi... A new idea came to Grievous's mind. "Get me Colonel Oro Dassyne," he announced to whichever droid was listening.

The disgraced Koorivar's hologram appeared. All the organic forces who had taken part in the coup were on Kashyyyk, under Dassyne's leadership, a chance for them to redeem themselves. "General?" asked Dassyne, after saluting.

"Get your demolitions team in here, Colonel. I have a job in which there can be no mistakes made."

The Korivar Fusiliers and Dassyne appeared minutes later, engineering squad in tow. "What's our job, sir?" asked Dassyne.

Grievous pointed at the tree. "There are thousands of Wookiees held up in that tree," he said. "The very young and the very old, mostly. They cannot fight back. You are going to rig this tree to explode." The Koorivar's eye twitched, and the engineers looked at each other, shifting and muttering. "*However*," Grievous said, very pointedly, "you are not going to attach your fuses to the bombs."

"Sir..?" Dassyne was confused.

"You must make the tree look like it is going to be brought down. The Wookiees must think the bombs are ready to explode. Only we will know that they will not," said Grievous.

"Why us, sir?" asked Dassyne. "Why not droids?"

"Because none of you want the blood of thousands of innocents on your hands, yes?" Grievous asked in turn, standing straight and staring at the engineers. "Therefore, I trust you will do this job well. There is no room for mistake."

"We can do it sir, but... the purpose is beyond me."

"The Jedi will think I mean to actually destroy the tree. They will come to stop me. I will kill them. It's very simple, Colonel." Grievous clasped his hands behind his back, and leaned over Dassyne. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir! We'll get right on it."

The Koorivars rapidly set to work, scrambling up and down the tree with cables and little else. One by one, their detonation packs were anchored to the tree, and their receivers activated. But in each one, the fuse had been removed – the explosive was useless. High up in the branches, a few Wookiees looked down, pointing and gesturing. But there was nothing they could do but call for help. Grievous made ready his ambush. After half an hour, the Koorivars had finished their work, and no Jedi had arrived. *Time to accelerate things.*

Grievous set out a holorecorder, and set it to an open channel. "Jedi!" he barked. "Behind me stands the wroshyr tree of Palsaang. Its citizens cower in there, powerless against my armies! As I speak, my engineers are preparing to destroy this tree and everyone inside. But know that I, Grievous, am not entirely without mercy. Face me, warrior to warrior, and I will spare their lives. Be quick, time is short and my patience is thin."

That ought to do it, Grievous thought, shutting down the transmission. He paced about on the sandy shore, his mechanical ears twitching as he tuned into the frequencies his droid army used. The spy satellites reported heat flares around Kachirho. Commando droids on deep reconnaissance saw gunships launching. Early warning sensors detected air targets inbound. *Yes, perfect*, Grievous thought.

"The Jedi are coming!" he announced to Dassyne. "Get your men in position, clones will likely be with them."

"Yes, sir, they won't last long against us," Dassyne said, before seeing to his troops.

"See to it," said Grievous, as he paced on the beach.

Red laser beams lit up the overcast sky, the OG-9s were opening fire. Explosions burst on the horizon, and then grew closer. The tell-tale rattling sound of the Republic gunship filled the air. *So predictable*, he thought. Grievous withdrew to the cover of an empty wroshyr tree, near its entrance, in case anyone got the bright idea of shooting missiles at him.

The gunships that made it through landed near the tree holding the Wookiees, clones in camouflaged armor piled out and were immediately pinned down by Dassyne's Koorivar and the the droids. But one gunship landed closer to Grievous, and out stepped a figure in black.

"Grievous!" she shouted. "Here I am! Come out, you coward!"

"I was starting to think you wouldn't come," Grievous answered, leaping out of the shadows. "Luminara Unduli, isn't it?"

Unduli's lightsaber snapped on. "I will not exchange pleasantries with a monster!"

"Then let us begin," said Grievous. He shrugged off his cape as he took up his four lightsabers. And he would need four for this, she was a Jedi Master. Dooku had made him study the most combat-adept Jedi Masters, Unduli was one of them, though she specialized in the defensive Form Three that he loathed so much.

Grievous knew challenging a Jedi on the open sand was suicidal. He would have no grip to defend himself against their Force attacks, and in broad daylight, she'd see his every move coming. No, Grievous was taking her into the empty wroshyr tree he stood in the shadow of. He stepped back, and saw Unduli's eyes narrow. With a burst of energy she blasted towards him, black robes and headdress billowing.

Perfect! Grievous darted up the causeway leading to the tree's entrance, and jumped into the darkness. The Wookiees were not a people who needed to live in high technology, they used a simple lamps that glowed dimly to light their tree-cities. Unduli would need a few minutes for her eyes to adjust, but Grievous wasn't going to allow that.

Grievous bounded up the spiraling ramp inside the vast, hollowed-out trunk, Unduli meters behind. He sent out a signal for power to the tree to be cut, and all went black. For Unduli, that was – Grievous switched to the thermal vision his eye implants gave him. The chip controlling the implants had already filtered the wavelength of her lightsaber, dulling it to an acceptable level while Grievous was on thermal vision. It'd already filtered his sabers years ago.

"I don't need my eyes to see you, coward," Unduli said. She walked towards Grievous, homing in on his presence in the Force.

"It's not me you should worry about," said Grievous. The Jedi froze, listening. *Hah! She fell for it!*

"Fight me, Grievous! That's what you wanted, isn't it?" asked Unduli.

"More than you could possibly imagine," Grievous growled, stalking towards the Jedi. Her focus was solely on him. *Now!*

Two magnaguards silently slipped from their hiding places, the crackle of their electrostaves centimeters before impact took Unduli completely by surprise. She screamed as they slammed into her back, but she was fast. Unduli twisted around to fight them off. Grievous activated all four of his lightsabers, splitting his arms down their length, and jumped in to join the fight.

The Jedi's Form Three style served her well, for the moment, she twisted and dodged, blocked and parried, putting all her concentration into anticipating each attack. Every few seconds, Grievous and his magnaguards switched up their styles of fighting, keeping Unduli on her toes, and preventing her from focusing enough to get off any Force attacks.

Lights, on! Grievous ordered, and all the lamps inside the tree came on again. The four of them were battling up the spiral ramp, Unduli had to shield her eyes at the sudden light. Grievous saw an opening and one of his sabers dipped through her defenses and sliced across her leg.

"You fight without honor," Unduli said through clenched teeth. Cyborg and droids had her cornered in a doorway now.

"I would not spare even a single drop of honor for the likes of you," Grievous said. "Do you feel the fear, Jedi? The helplessness? Knowing that you are doomed to die alone here?"

"I have made my peace with the Force," said Unduli. "I do not fear death."

"So be it." Grievous swung all four blades down on her, she blocked, groaning as she threw everything she had into countering his strength. The magnaguards struck, the staves hitting her waist and sending an agonizing wave of electricity through the Jedi. She fell to the ground, panting. "Is that all?" asked Grievous. "A great Jedi Master laid low so quickly? My newest student would have lasted longer!" *If I used one lightsaber only, maybe.*

And then Grievous was hurtling backwards, his talons digging deep into the wood of the ramp while his guards went flying down to the bottom of the tree. Unduli stood, hand raised towards him, jaw set, eyes narrowed. "That's not even the start," she said.

Grievous laughed. "Finally, a challenge!"

"Let's go, R8," Esera said to her droid companion. She was back in her sneaking clothes, cloak drawn about her, both to preserve anonymity and sooth her self-consciousness. The thought of someone seeing her in an outfit that fit so snugly was too embarrassing to even imagine. Never would Esera understand how some people went around wearing virtually nothing without burning up in a ball of fire.

A bigger problem was on her mind, though, than just how she looked. *Scimitar* awaited her in hangar four, steeped in dark side power. Esera's stomach churned just remembering the sensation she'd felt inside. *No more dark side, never again*, she thought. *Grievous will kill you if you ever touch the dark side again. I'll kill you if you ever touch the dark side again, Esera!*

Once again, Esera skirted around the hangar to the annex building, and found the computer terminal. This time, though, she tried to access the security system. "This is a trick I learned from Voyan," Esera said to R8. With the Force, she tapped the keyboard from afar, entering *admin* into the security system. No pass. Esera then tried the building number. Pass. "I cannot believe how lazy some people are," she sighed.

R8 made a low beep in response.

Esera opened the unlocked window, and then pulled R8 in after her. After R8, she levitated up her suitcase, since she didn't want to lose her first infallible safety vest she'd worn in Separatist service. They made their way through the four dark and empty hangars, until they reached the shadowy bulk of *Scimitar*. With some Force help, Esera pulled down the tarp, though it got repeatedly stuck on the angular radiators. R8 chimed in every now and then, wheeling in circles around the ship, stopping to scan panels at random, it seemed, until Esera tapped on one and realized there was a hollow space behind it.

"Good find," she said to the droid. "You're full of surprises, *Scimitar*. I don't like that name, by the way. We'll have to find a new one."

Scimitar was silent, but Esera was sure she saw a brief glow behind the viewport.

Esera opened up the ship. "See if you can interface with her," Esera said. R8 rolled in, completely unaware of the dark side energy around him. Esera stowed her suitcase in one of the bunk-bays, and then set about opening the hangar doors. She'd just figured out the controls for them and was watching them slowly rumble open, when a familiar presence started to tug at her mind. A very familiar presence.

A presence she'd been near for almost six months, on Shumavar.

No way, Esera thought, as her blood ran cold. She froze where she stood, and listened for anything over the slow crawl of the doors. Footsteps. Plastoid boots on duracrete. "R8, we've got company!" she called out. A distant squeak acknowledged, and *Scimitar's* engines began to spool.

The hangar lights switched on, and the clone trooper squad rushed in, guns leveled. Instantly, Esera saw the 14th Legion's markings, one of the many variations on a flame-orange color. And with them came a man she hoped she'd never see again. There he was, dark Jedi robe over his white armor, that self-satisfied smile on his harsh, hawkish face, his nearly platinum hair push back to give him an even more aquiline appearance.

"Esera Komara!" called Ardabur Aspar. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Esera's hand dropped to the lightsaber at her hip, as she tried not to panic.

"Nothing to say? I'm hurt!" Aspar put a hand over his heart. "We went through so much together, until you betrayed your nation, your people, your Order, your ideals... Mmh, shame about that."

"I betrayed nothing but a failed state," Esera said, "and an Order no longer fit to follow."

"I wish Olor Callo could hear that!" laughed Aspar. "What would he think, knowing that weak, timid little girl he'd taken as a padawan because no one else wanted her, has ended up falling to the dark side and joining the likes of General Grievous?"

Esera clenched her jaw harder, her fists curled up until he knuckles were white, her eyes watered.

"That stings, doesn't it?" Aspar went on, as he paced back and forth between her and the clones. "You've failed the only person who ever cared about you. Oh, that must be hellish, no wonder you turned to the dark side! I heard you had Ahsoka Tano on the ropes, at least until she cut your hand off! How is that, by the way?"

"Why are you here, Aspar?" Esera asked, as the dark side began to howl in her ear, crying out to her, *begging* her to use its power, to give into rage and hate- *No!*

"I didn't mean to be here, honestly. I was just passing through, a few parsecs away. Doing my duty to the Republic, and all. But imagine my shock when our beloved but naive Senator Padme Amidala reported to Republic Intelligence that a Separatist going only by the name Esera had contacted her!" Aspar shook the hilt of his lightsaber at her, his other fist placed on his hip. "Naughty, naughty, Komara. We don't like it when enemy agents try to recruit our people. My troops and I came as quick as we could to arrest you. Don't worry, we informed Amidala of your identity. She knows you're a fallen Jedi traitor now."

"I am *not* fallen!" Esera said. The dark side roiled around her, as the flames of fury began to rise in her heart. *I will not fall again!* she told herself.

"Obi-wan Kenobi begs to differ," said Aspar. "I've testified it to the Council, and now Kenobi has too. You're in the Jedi Archives now, Komara! There's an entry on you, in the list of dark Jedi. It doesn't say much, and I doubt it ever will. But, between you and I," Aspar took a step closer, and dropped his voice a little, "I can't really blame you. Sometimes you just need a little more power... I understand, I really do. Alas, the law is the law. You're wanted dead or alive, Komara. I'm fine with either."

There was only one thing for it, now. "You're as blind and hypocritical as the rest of them," she said, taking up her lightsaber.

"Dead it is, then. You always were a terrible duelist." Aspar's blade snapped on, electric blue.

Esera thumbed the igniter on her saber, the bright green blade of her weapon blazing on to meet her enemy's. *Remember what Grievous told you, about Form Five users*, Esera told herself. They were fast, they were strong, their brute force could overpower Esera's newly-learned Form Two techniques. *Keep moving, never stop moving, don't even block his blade, just avoid it entirely!*

The fight began when Aspar charged forward, and Esera dipped out of the way, letting him shoot straight past. Her right hand spasmed as old muscle memory tried to activate, but Esera kept her left hand, her sword hand, steady. Aspar came at her again and again, like a furious storm, but each time, Esera let her footwork take her to safety as her foe only got a glancing blow on her blade. Aspar was taller, heavier, and stronger than her, he had every advantage in this fight except agility, and even then, he likely had more endurance than her too. Esera just had to avoid him until *Scimitar* finished powering up,

which would only be in a minute or two.

But a minute or two was a long time in a lightsaber fight.

Time and again, Grievous had been warned to always have surprise, fear, and intimidation on his side when facing Jedi. Luminara Unduli was a strong Jedi, maybe not as strong as Kenobi, but in a completely different league than his own turncoat, Esera Komara. But lately, Grievous had been discovering another advantage that he would always inevitably have: stamina.

Organic muscles could only go so long at their full strength, before fatigue took its toll. The hydraulics and electric servos powering Grievous would work at their maximum potential as long as his body had power. So, he let Unduli go on the offensive, he pretended to retreat, he pretended to get nervous, and then frightened. The Jedi dared to smirk as she chased him higher and higher up the tree, unaware of the trap he was planning.

Unduli had switched over to Form Five, strong and aggressive, far more entertaining and educating. Every minute longer this battle went on, the more Grievous recorded and learned. He began recognizing patterns, how certain attacks were used, which of his own attacks were best countered or most dangerous to his foe. He almost wished he could freeze Unduli and keep her around for future sparring practice, she was a thousand times more useful than Komara was for that. But his play time was soon interrupted.

"General," Colonel Dassyne's voice said into Grievous's ear, "we have the clones surrounded, but there's a second wave of gunships coming in. There's another Jedi in one." Grievous sent a signal back acknowledging the new information. *Another one? Time to end this.*

Grievous had allowed himself to be pushed into a long hall near the top of the tree, build into one of the limbs, he supposed. Natural light came from windows above, and there was a staircase going up to the top. He scrambled for the stairs, and Unduli chased, until they were up and out of the tree, on top of one of the great limbs, with the canopy reaching into the mist high above.

"It's over, Grievous!" Unduli said, breathing heavily. "You're cornered, there's nowhere to go. Face your death with whatever dignity you have left."

Grievous snorted. "I should say the same to you, Jedi!"

Before Unduli could respond, Grievous had all four blades spinning, and he was flying at her. His blades were like a whirlwind of light, interrupted by slashes from his taloned feet, which tore Unduli's robes to shreds. Grievous bore down on the Jedi with his own style of Form Five, relentless, brutal, and overpowering. In less than a minute, Unduli was staggering, her arms shaking, her breath ragged. Grievous's foot finally caught her square on, he heard delicious cracks from her ribcage as she went flying off the limb of the tree. Grievous plunged after her, using his talons and sabers to barely maintain control over his descent down the trunk. Even with a wounded leg and smashed ribcage, Unduli was making her own controlled fall down the tree. This Jedi was a strong woman, Grievous would respect that. But in the end, she was still only a Jedi.

Unduli's wounded leg gave out when she hit the sand. She screamed, and tried to rise, but Grievous was on her. With one foot, he kicked her down, and then yanked her head up to look at the wroshyr tree that had started this duel.

"This is our little secret, Jedi," Grievous whispered into her ear. Unduli wheezed with each shallow breath, a sound Grievous had heard before, from men whose broken ribs had pierced their lungs. "Those bombs on the tree, that you came here to save? They never even had fuses. Not a single Wookiee in there was ever in danger. You have died for nothing!"

Whatever she might have said, the Galaxy would never know. Grievous stabbed her through.

Someone screamed, but it wasn't Unduli. When Grievous looked up, he saw another Jedi, dozens of meters away, a green blade in his hands, his clone troopers holding him back. "General, we need to leave!" The clone's voice was barely audible to even Grievous's enhanced hearing. "Those bombs aren't armed, this was a trap for her and it's a trap for you!"

"Grievous!" the Jedi bellowed, his voice booming across the beach through the Force. "I will kill you for this!"

He wasn't even going to reply to such a generic threat; instead he picked up Unduli's lightsaber. Grievous looked over to the circling HMP gunships. *Shoot them down*, he ordered. The droids dived as the Republic gunships lifted off, beginning a nasty furball over the beach, until Republic fighters dived down on the droids in turn. Grievous retreated into cover once more, and reviewed his archive of known Jedi. *Human, dark skin, horizontal yellow line across face, long dark hair...* Yes, that had been Quinlan Vos, there was no doubt. A Jedi even more powerful than Unduli. The next few days were going to be very interesting.

Once more, Esera swept past Aspar's lightsaber, dancing around him in a way that might have almost looked easy to their clone trooper audience. But Esera was on her last wind. She just couldn't keep up against an opponent like this one. His reach was too long, his strength too great, and Esera's connection to the Force was too weak to make up for any of that. She had to work twice as hard to just avoid him, let alone strike. And when their blades connected, Aspar hit hard.

Esera managed to get in several jabs as she slipped by his defenses one last time, and even grazed his shoulder pauldron. "I'm impressed," Aspar said, discarding his smoking robe. "You actually hit me!" Esera was panting, she had nothing to say, even if she had breath to waste on speech. "Your form is sloppy, your technique crude. And already, you're spent! If Grievous thought you could be the next Ventress, he was sorely mistaken."

"I will never... be like her!" Esera said between breaths.

"No, you won't," agreed Aspar. He launched himself at her again, even faster than before, his blade smashed into hers and knocked Esera back. Aspar whirled around and slammed into her again before she could recover, knocking her back against one of *Scimitar's* landing struts. She ducked down, slipping around to Aspar's side, but he was already turning with her. Aspar bashed her lightsaber aside, Esera's exhausted muscles finally giving out, and then that blue blade whipped about again. Just barely, Esera managed to throw herself backwards, but the blade still sliced her chest.

A flare of agony shot through her, and Esera smelled her own flesh burning. She hit the floor, her head bumping on the ramp of the ship, her eyes tearing up as she tried not to scream. Aspar's blade was at her chin, she could feel its heat. "That was quick," Aspar said, looking down at her. "Looks like I'm taking you in alive, Esera! Pathetic, you couldn't even *die* right-"

Suddenly, something screeched and beeped from above her. R8 shook back and forth on his legs, lights blinking in rage, his lubricating oil dispenser extended, his lighter held in front of it. Aspar had only a moment to stare uncomprehending at the furious astromech droid before a blast of fire exploded out through the air above Esera.

Aspar cried out as the flames enveloped him, and the thick black smoke of burning oil filled the air. Esera shut out the pain lancing through her, and pulled herself up the ramp while she could. "Go!" Esera screamed to the ship. "Go!"

Scimitar's ramp receded, and the clamshell doors closed, just as the clones started firing at them. Something impacted the hull with a dull thump. The ship lifted off the ground, and the engines roared. Esera clutched her chest, and pushed herself to the lift up to the cabin, R8 following along. They were hurtling over the bright lights of Theed, up to the twinkling stars above.

R8 beeped and whistled as Esera leaned on the control panel. "Where, where do I go," she muttered through grit teeth. Through a haze, she was aware she was crying, and that the wound on her chest was still burning. *May the Force guide me*, she thought, as *Scimitar* rocketed out of the atmosphere and out of Naboo's orbit. Esera closed her eyes and pointed the nose of the ship somewhere, and punched the hyperdrive.

As the stars streaked into lines and *Scimitar* entered the swirling blue vortex of hyperspace, Esera collapsed onto the floor, next to R8. She lay her head against the droid. "Thank you," Esera whispered, hugging his cold metal body. R8 did his low whistle. Esera closed her eyes again, and passed out as the pain took her.

Author's notes: Another canon Force-using character bites the dust. That's... three, now. Anakin and Sheev in chapter 1, Luminara Unduli in chapter 25. Falling far short of ASD 1.0! Ardabur Aspar got to have page-time again for the first time since chapter 9 (posted November 2016, oof), I enjoyed writing their exchange. Grievous's battle with Luminara was supposed to be chapter 26 material, but I realized it worked better in concert with Esera getting her butt kicked once again by someone superior to her in every way. Unfortunately this made the chapter 11K words while chapter 26 is so far, much less. But there's more fun to come, folks!

On that note, I'm hoping to release a chapter once a week until Christmas, which puts me with three more to come this month. However, I must emphasize this may not be possible, not because it's the holidays (I detest them because I'm the Grinch IRL, writing Star Wars fanfic from my cave) but because there's some other obligations I have to fulfill in the coming weeks. So, see you guys in chapter 26, next week.

Name:

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